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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10
Fighting for Contentment

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Judging by today's Bible readings, it is time to contend again with a determined deity: money. Money can be an idol for each of us, rich or poor. If we are not careful, it is all too easy to find ourselves bowing down and worshiping money. So, St. Paul contends against that idol. In our Epistle Lesson for today, for example, St. Paul says that *love* of money is "the root of all evil."

But before getting to that, the apostle speaks of contentment, and that is my main text for this sermon. Sometimes we need to *fight* for contentment.

Let's begin with this text from our Epistle Lesson:

⁶There is great gain in godliness with *contentment*. (1 Timothy 6:6, RSV)

With this verse, St. Paul recommends to young Timothy the path that he himself has learned to walk: the path of contentment:

...for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. (Philippians 4:11, KJV)

Paul says that he knows how to live modestly, and he knows how to live luxuriously too. And how good it would be if we could reach the level of faith and confidence St. Paul expresses in his great testimony:

¹³I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13, RSV)

Many a grey-haired saint could say Amen to such apostolic teaching. After trying their hands at other ways of life, they have come to value godliness with contentment. The maelstrom of money -- of pursuing it, of saving it, of grieving when it departs -- no longer appeals to them. Time has taught them that piety and simplicity bring pleasure too. St. Paul's counsel to young Timothy has a ring of truth for them too:

⁷for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. (1 Timothy 6:7-8, RSV)

Indeed, contentment in general is a lovely thing, not just “godliness with contentment,” but also contentment wherever we can find it in this busy world. Driving a car *with contentment*, for example, is a good thing. That is why I nearly always start off a drive with a prayer for all drivers that they will enjoy safety and peace in their travels. Safety is good, of course, but it is even better to drive safely with peace, so that you are not angry with other drivers and stressed out by the time you reach your destination.

There is great gain, to take another example, in married love with contentment. The years slip by, husband and wife both slow down, strength declines, maybe wits too, and yet each can whisper a heartfelt prayer of thanks for the beloved and each morning seems fresh and good because of facing it with that one who captured their heart so long ago. They do not yearn for love beyond what they already have. They are content.

Also, being single with contentment is a good thing. Carol and I count various Catholic priests among our dearest friends. They are not married, and never will be married, yet they are joyful people, delighting in their friends and taking deep satisfaction from their vocations. Their hearts are not restless, except that they desire more and more to rest in God.

Even searching for a new friend can be good when done with a spirit of contentment. Jim Morrison of the Doors used to sing out a line about a needing a brand new friend:

I need a brand new friend who doesn't bother me.
I need a brand new friend who doesn't trouble me. (*Hyacinth House*,
1971)

But even such yearning and searching for a brand new friend can be good if done with contentment; that is, without a spirit of contempt for the friends we already have, with confidence that God will provide, and with openness to enjoying life day by day.

This matter of a “brand new friend” is important, in my opinion. Christian contentment does not mean abandoning our ambitions, hopes, and dreams. No, Christian contentment does not mean abandoning our hopes and dreams, but rather that we pursue our ambitions with some grace, such that we do not despise the blessings we already have, we trust the goodness of God, and we forsake any ambitions or paths that are unworthy of Christ's man, Christ's woman, Christ's child.

Again, there is much to be said in favor of contentment on your job. It is good at the end of the day to be able to say, “I did good work today. It might not be a fancy job, and I might not be doing this work forever, but for now, I have job to do and I do it well.”

Many of you will remember Priscilla and Oscar Schaedle. When I think of contentment in work, I find myself thinking of them. One of my favorite places in this grand city was simply Oscar's workshop, where he restored furniture. He was

a master of his craft, completely at ease as he worked. He had good space to work in, good tools, good light, classical music playing in the background, his cat sleeping on a cushion. He had acquired high skills over his lifetime, and he calmly put those skills to work restoring beautiful furniture. He always struck me as a contented man.

And it was the same with Priscilla in her work in our Altar Guild. From a pastor's point of view, I love the Altar Guild here at Immanuel. Priscilla was right in line with a spirit of devotion, humility, and contentment I have seen in all of our Altar Guild workers over the years. I am proud to be around those folks, both the men and the women of that Guild. And let me pause to say that we happen to need some more Altar Guild workers nowadays, and so if you are interested, please speak to me about it.

All things considered, many ways of life are good if done with contentment.

But the thing that especially interests me in our text is how St. Paul combines *contentment*, which seems to be such a restful notion, with *fighting*, which seems to be such an energetic idea. Shortly after speaking of contentment, St. Paul preaches his famous line to young Timothy:

¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; (1 Timothy 6:12, RSV)

This, in turn, led the old commentator Matthew Henry to the sensible saying...

Those who will get to heaven must fight their way thither.¹

Apparently, St. Paul speaks of a *contentment* that requires a *contending*. And so it is: Christian contentment contends against temptations and against ingratitude. Christian contentment disciplines and trains itself to not be overcome by restlessness, covetousness, and that extraordinary desire for things that leaves us almost vibrating with impatience to have them.

Furthermore, today's Bible stories distinguish true *contentment* from *indifference*. That is, it is possible to be content in a wrong way, in a self-satisfied way that cares little for the neighbor, or even in a wicked way that acquires things by robbery, theft, or fraud.

And so we have an interesting contrast of ideas within our texts. We have two attitudes of rest, one of which the Bible praises and one which it condemns. The good one is the one I have been praising so far:

⁶There is great gain in godliness with *contentment*. (1 Timothy 6:6, RSV)

¹ Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*: New Modern Edition, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1991 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.

And the bad sense of contentment is the one which so troubles the Lord in our first reading from Amos. “Woe to those who are *at ease* in Zion.” Listen to how the *New Jerusalem Bible* describes those who are so at ease they have made themselves insensible to the misery of others:

⁴Lying on ivory beds and sprawling on their divans, they dine on lambs from the flock, and stall-fattened veal; ⁵they bawl to the sound of the lyre and, like David, they invent musical instruments; ⁶they drink wine by the bowlful, and lard themselves with the finest oils, *but for the ruin of Joseph they care nothing.* (Amos 6:4-6, NJB)

This is what ails the rich man in our Lord’s parable in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. In his earthy life, he had been *too* content, *overly* content. He had been content in a way that did not grieve for the poor man at his gate, Lazarus. The Bible speaks of no injustice on the rich man’s part. As far as we know, he did not become rich by robbing Lazarus. Nor did he treat Lazarus roughly nor drive him away. He just ignored his poor neighbor. He was content to eat, drink, and be merry, but also to be content for Lazarus to hunger.

As could be expected, Lazarus died first. Being poor and hungry wears a person down. So, the poor man died and went to heaven, into the arms of father Abraham. But it is a serious matter to note that the rich man did not fare well in his afterlife, and there seems to be no cure for him. He lives in torment and his plea for mercy is met with the reality that it is too late for him now:

²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’

Sometimes it is easy to be content, even to be fairly godly with contentment. Earlier this week I received an email from Carol who was reading an early draft of this sermon while having lunch at Friendly’s, which is one of her favorite restaurants on the road. She sent me the quick note, “I’m content.” Well, yea, she was eating at Friendly’s. I wished I were with her.

Likewise, this past Wednesday afternoon, when I was listening to our Music Director, Dr. Gwendolyn Toth, play French Baroque harpsichord music here at one of her midtown concerts, I thought to myself, “Life is good! I’m content.”

But sometimes Christian contentment is not easy, but must be labored for. It must be sought after through a process of purifying the heart, releasing some desires and learn again to be grateful for things we do have. And it can never be the kind of contentment that is willing for the rest of the world to go to hell in a handbasket, for that was not the way of Jesus.

Indeed, our hope and our salvation in life depend upon a fundamental *restlessness* in Jesus, such that he was not content to rest in heaven, while we on earth struggled on toward hell. He was not content to count equality with God “a thing to be grasped,” but emptied himself and took on the form of a servant for our sakes. (Philippians 2) What wonderful restlessness, that he should exchange luxury for poverty, that we might become rich through him:

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV)

This too, then, is part of what it means for you and me to take up our cross and follow Jesus: it means that we should fight for contentment, but a Christ-like contentment that is grateful for present blessings and yearning for blessings for our neighbor, including the blessing that our neighbor too should come to Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.